DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 749 TM 017 681

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TITLE The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-TM-92-1
PUB DATE Mar 92
CONTRACT RI88062003
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; *Competence; *Employment Qualifications; High School Graduates; High Schools; Individual Characteristics; Interpersonal Competence; *Job Skills; *Skill Analysis; Skilled Workers; *Thinking Skills; Vocational Evaluation; Youth Employment
IDENTIFIERS Department of Labor; *Foundation Skills; Secretarys Comm on Achieving Necessary Skills

ABSTRACT

In 1990, Elizabeth Dole, then Secretary of the Department of Labor, established the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) to determine the skills that youths need to participate in the workplace and the skill levels that entry-level jobs require. SCANS determined that workplace skills consist of foundation skills and competencies. Foundation skills are in the three domains of basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities. Competencies fall into the domains of resources, interpersonal skills, information skills, systems skills, and technology utilization skills. SCANS identified and defined these skills by asking commission members for ideas, visiting successful corporations, and reviewing research. A panel of experts then drafted a list of skills that were further refined through review and consultation. SCANS used a sample of 50 jobs to see how the skills related and how clear and comprehensive the experts found the definitions to be. SCANS also studied how proficient workers needed to be in each foundation skill and competency by asking 20 people to rate the skill levels required for job tasks identified by the job analysis. SCAN has two further charges: (1) to suggest effective ways to assess proficiency; and (2) to develop a dissemination strategy for homes, schools, unions, and businesses. Three references are listed. (SLD)

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THE SECRETARY OF LABOR'S COMMISSION ON ACQUIRING NEEDED SKILLS

EDO-TM-92-1

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The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills

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What skills will prepare our youth to participate in the modern workplace? What skill levels do entry-level jobs require? In 1990, Elizabeth Dole, then secretary of the Department of Labor, established the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) to answer these questions.

What are workplace skills?

To find meaningful work, high school graduates need to master certain workplace skills. SCANS calls these essentials *foundation skills* and *competencies*.

Workers use foundation skills—academic and behavioral characteristics—to build competencies on. Foundation skills fall into three domains:

- *basic skills*—reading, writing, speaking, listening, and knowing arithmetic and mathematical concepts;
- *thinking skills*—reasoning, making decisions, thinking creatively, solving problems, seeing things in the mind's eye, and knowing how to learn; and
- *personal qualities*—responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity, and honesty.

Competencies, however, more closely relate to what people actually do at work. The competencies that SCANS has identified fall into five domains:

- *resources*—identifying, organizing, planning, and allocating time, money, materials, and workers;
- *interpersonal skills*—negotiating, exercising leadership, working with diversity, teaching others new skills, serving clients and customers, and participating as a team member;
- *information skills*—using computers to process information and acquiring and evaluating, organizing and maintaining, and interpreting and communicating information;
- *systems skills*—understanding systems, monitoring and correcting system performance, and improving and designing systems; and
- *technology utilization skills*—selecting technology, applying technology to a task, and maintaining and troubleshooting technology.

How did SCANS identify and define the skills?

SCANS began a four-step process by first formulating its approach to identifying the skills:

- asking commissioners for their comments and suggestions,
- visiting successful corporations that stress high-level employee skills, and
- reviewing recent research and discussing skills with researchers and analysts.

Next, in a workshop, a panel of experts reviewed this research and suggested a draft set of initial skills. In clear, understandable terms, these skills describe what capabilities American workers need.

Second, to define those skills, SCANS reviewed the literature from psychological, education, and business data bases. The definitions that SCANS wrote include a description of the skill itself and an illustration of a worker competently using the skill.

In the third stage, SCANS asked research and business experts, among others, to review the skills and definitions to determine whether anything was

missing in any domain. These experts also reviewed some examples of how workers might use the skills.

Fourth, SCANS analyzed jobs in various areas of the economy to see how the skills apply. SCANS chose a sample of 50 jobs to represent the various employment sectors identified by the Department of Labor. These 50 jobs

- are part of a meaningful career path,
- are expected to make up a large proportion of jobs in the future economy, and collectively,
- call on diverse skills.

Examples include farmer, cosmetologist, personnel specialist, and law enforcement officer.

For this job analysis, SCANS asked job experts to review the skill definitions and to rate how critical each skill is to the jobs. For any skill that the experts considered highly critical, SCANS asked them to detail a task requiring a worker to use that skill. Then, SCANS asked the job experts about critical incidents that would call for workers to proficiently use the skills.

SCANS used the data collected from the job analysis to evaluate how clear and comprehensive job experts found the skill definitions, and to estimate how critical the skills are across a range of jobs.

How did SCANS identify levels of skill difficulty?

Besides defining workplace skills, SCANS studied how proficient workers need to be in each foundation skill and competency.

SCANS scaled the job tasks identified in the job analysis. SCANS asked 20 people to rate the skill level required to effectively perform each job task. These scaled tasks will become benchmarks for each skill, illustrating several levels of difficulty for the skills.

What are the next steps?

SCANS has two other charges:

- suggest effective ways to assess proficiency, and
- develop a dissemination strategy for homes, schools, unions, and businesses.

To find ways to assess proficiency, SCANS will consider and report on the issues involved in assessing students. These issues include authentic assessment that employers could use in academic and hiring decisions.

To develop a dissemination strategy, SCANS will study issues we must consider before schools can integrate instruction in the competencies into current programs. These issues include financial considerations as well as teacher training and curriculum concerns.

Despite some disagreement over the relevance of these skills (Samuelson, 1991), Lynn Martin, the new Department of Labor secretary, supports the ideas discussed in the first SCANS report. She believes that in today's economy, we must do more than educate students about reading, writing, and arithmetic: "Diplomas must reflect the demands of a changing workplace for broader skills beyond the 3 Rs" (Martin, 1991).

According to William E. Brock, the chair of SCANS, the end product "must include the publication of necessary functional and enabling skills which society must provide to every child in this country by the age of 16. Our mission, once these are enumerated, must be to bring the progressive forces of this country to bear on those changes in public education which would allow us to meet the stated objective. Every school would be affected, every child would be affected, every workplace would be affected."

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Pelavin Associates, the American Institutes for Research, and the Institute on Education and the Economy provide technical and research support to SCANS.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education under contract number R-88-062003. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education. ***Permission is granted to copy and distribute this Digest.***